

State must restore funds for public hospitals

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In the early morning hours of Jan. 7, I received a call from the Aptos fire captain: "Lieutenant Governor Garamendi, does your family live in Aptos?"

Those words marked the beginning of many agonizing days, as my wife, Patti, and I learned that her sister had perished in a fast-moving house fire, her niece had sustained burns, and her mother was in critical condition after having been airlifted to the burn center at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center.

On arriving at the Santa Clara Valley Medical Center in San Jose, we learned that Patti's mother was in critical condition, barely alive with severe smoke inhalation and burned lungs.

The expert medical team of the burn center - the public hospital for Santa Clara County and the primary burn trauma center for a multi-county region of the state - had immediately gone to work to stabilize her, keeping her breathing and on the slow road to recovery.

The care the medical staff and the hospital provided from the initial trauma and burn treatment to the ensuing care over the next days was extraordinary. The staff not only responded to her medical needs, but also to her emotional needs.

My mother-in-law is now recovering in our home, having regained much of her strength, breathing ability and mental alertness.

Throughout my 30 years in public office, I have always appreciated the important role of our public hospitals in our state's health care network. But having seen firsthand the world-class treatment offered by the burn center at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center, I am left with a deep, personal understanding of why we need to support their mission and their ability to provide care.

My family's personal story unfolded at the same time our state's budget deficit story was unfolding. While I was watching a premier public hospital provide superb treatment to our loved ones, I also watched our governor propose a budget that would slash funds to Santa Clara Valley Medical Center and to the 20 other public hospitals and health systems throughout the state.

In February, the Legislature agreed to the governor's demand for a 10-percent cut in Medi-Cal funds. And now the second shoe may drop as the governor proposes cutting crucial safety net funds specifically designed to help public hospitals care for the poor and the uninsured.

Throughout the state, public hospitals will lose millions of dollars needed to care for not only our most vulnerable residents but for any Californian who may find himself or herself in critical need at any time, just as my family did.

Santa Clara Valley Medical Center, like many other public hospitals, has been meeting the challenge of dealing with funding cuts for some time. Over the past seven years, the hospital

has suffered more than \$148 million in budget reductions. With yet another round of cuts, they are finding it more and more difficult to keep providing all the services they do today. Something will have to give, and if the financial reductions continue, the hospital will need to make difficult decisions about cutting services and staff.

These proposed cuts are worsened by the fact that as our economy falters, the number of families and individuals on Medi-Cal and uninsured are increasing. And so are the demands placed on our public hospitals, which treat the overwhelming majority of these individuals.

What makes the proposed cuts all the more vexing is that California was last - behind all other 49 states and the District of Columbia - on its financial support for the Medicaid (Medi-Cal) program.

Our state's public hospitals simply cannot continue to sustain these cuts. Already, these health care providers offer care on extremely limited funds - they receive only 50 cents' reimbursement for every dollar spent on services to Medi-Cal recipients, and they depend on additional funding from the Safety Net Care Pool. Yet they somehow provide care that is of the highest quality, and with great efficiency.

Many people in our state mistakenly believe that public hospitals serve only the uninsured and indigent. But the reality is that any one of us could suffer a horrible accident that requires life-saving emergency care. California's public hospitals can't continue to provide premier services while sustaining cut after cut after cut.

I ask your readers to join me in asking the governor and the Legislature to take our hospitals off financial life support by reinstating their essential funding. Any one of our lives could depend on it.